

**POWER AND AUTHORITY**  
in  
**EASTERN CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE**

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## Contents

President's Preface 9

Editor's Preface 11

### PART I: POWER AND AUTHORITY IN ANCIENT TEXTS AND TRADITION

Authority, Obedience, and the Holiness of God: The New  
Testament Sense of the Kingdom 17  
*John A. McGuckin*

Literacy, Orality, and the Brokerage of Power and Authority  
in Late Antique Egyptian Christianity 33  
*Stamenka E. Antonova*

'I Must Decrease': Spiritual Direction and Power in the Orthodox  
Tradition 60  
*Alexis Torrance*

"The Limits Now Fixed": Appealing to Authority in the  
Trullan Canons 69  
*Seraphim Danckaert*

The Relationship between Bishops, Synods, and the  
Metropolitan-Bishop in the Orthodox Canonical Tradition 82  
*Alexander Rentel*

The Theology of St. Cyprian of Carthage: The Unity of the  
Church and the Role of the Bishop 90  
*Theodor Damian*

An Exploration of Hierarchy as Fractal in the Theology of  
Dionysios the Areopagite 102  
*Georgia Williams*

and explaining its import,<sup>34</sup> must of necessity know the mystery of the Name which we assume, in whose Name we act. It is not enough, if it ever was, simply to repeat the tales of the Kingdom, or stories of the presence of God. What is being offered to us in our foundational scriptures is that those who stand with Christ, in that trembling eschatological interstices we call the Church, need to leave the ground while shouting out the threefold *Qadosh* of the angels. For the Name of God demands that we enter into it in awe to experience its *dynamis*, not stand on the sidelines of commentary like some post-modern paralytic, waiting for someone to carry our pallet into the water.

<sup>34</sup> For Jesus gives his authority as a charism to his Church (Luke 4:6; Luke 4:32; Lk. 10:19) but will not share it with those who claim authority yet cannot demonstrate true knowledge of the Name from their lives (Matt 9:6-8; Mk. 2.10; Lk. 5.24; See also: Mt. 21.23-27; Mk. 11.28;-33; Lk. 20. 2-8.)

## Literacy, Orality, and the Brokerage of Power and Authority in Late Antique Egyptian Christianity

*Stamenka E. Antonova*

### *Introduction*

The question of literary genre is closely connected with the line of development of Christianity in general, and of the Egyptian desert movement of the late antique period in particular. From different Christian practices and experimentations with asceticism in the third and fourth centuries of the common era emerge differing forms of expression and articulation. In Egypt, for instance, there evolve at least three distinct genres that take different forms and yet are spurred by the very same phenomenon of the practice of *askesis* and/or the encounter with men and women who endeavor to coin and to improve on such ascetic practices. One literary genre is the emerging elaboration of rules and manuals regulating and governing the daily monastic activities; this genre, albeit a later development in the Egyptian desert tradition, comes to be very influential with the passage of time, particularly in the western and the eastern churches. In this vein is the activity of Basil of Caesarea, when he attempts to write the Shorter and the Longer Rules, and of many others. The production of rules is furthermore strictly associated with the construction of one particular – perhaps totalitarian in its character – model of ascetic life, namely cenobism. This is the kind of genre which will not be treated here but it will remain in the background as a reminder of other possible developments articulating divergent forms of not only literature, but also of actual ascetic practices.

Another example of an emergent literary genre from the desert tradition is the life (Greek: *bios*; Latin: *vita*). This is most certainly not a brand new genre in the late antique period for it draws heavily and is largely conditioned by long-established ways of creating a narrative out of peoples' lives and thereby preserving them for posterity. The genre of *vita* in the Christian context nonetheless reveals certain aspects of the Egyptian desert sub-culture that need to be explored. The writers of *lives* are themselves representatives of the dominant (secular) culture that infiltrates itself and bursts into the desert holy (wo)men by trying to

appropriate and claim them for itself. These *lives* are the artifact of spectators and on-lookers who have been profoundly impressed and influenced by the desert's inhabitants. Despite the fact that the creation of verbalized *lives* is a result of personal observation and contact with the holy (wo)men, they remain portraits seen and drawn from one particular angle and, moreover, with a particular bent toward the readers in the center or the midst of late antique society, rather than for the ones located at its fringes and on the borderlines of the desert frontier. A *life* is a deliberate attempt to capture the spirit of the desert in words, to encapsulate and transport it back into the main body of society (in physical and cultural terms); yet, it presents itself to people who are unacquainted with it and wish to emulate it. A *vita* both brings with it the familiarity with the life in the Egyptian wilderness and at the same time insinuates and presumes its own distance from it. Such a fundamental contradiction is transparent for example when the authors of *lives* tend to valorize the denigration of culture by desert ascetics, while, at the same time, they themselves are resorting to and making full-blown use of the heights of ancient culture.<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of illustrating this specific genre and its significance in the formation of the 'Egyptian desert' both as an actual and as a literary reality in the period of late antiquity, and undeniably much beyond it, I will analyze some relevant aspects from Athanasius's *Vita Antonii* and will try to contrast and compare it to other *lives* available from that place and period.

Lastly, the third genre emerging from the unquenchable spirit of the Egyptian desert – which perhaps of the three genres comes most closely to the actual living persons that had engendered them all – is the sayings of the desert fathers and mothers, known as *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Although the composition and the constitution of these sayings has been controverted and questioned, I will look at the genre as such, rather than enter into a debate about different sayings and their reputed veracity or lack thereof, and, besides, at the importance of this kind of genre in the context of Egyptian society and of the desert movement. For this purpose, I assume that the oral tradition – in contradistinction to the written traditions, such as literary *lives* and rules, – arises strictly from within the ascetic movement and fulfills certain roles that cannot be completed by the presence of other literary forms. Furthermore, I also assume that the oral tradition is not only primary, coming before the articulation of alternative ways of inscription which avail with memory and prefer the written letter, but also the dominant one within the sub-culture of the Egyptian desert.

<sup>1</sup> Such is Anthony's dilemma in *Vita Antonii*. See below.

So far, I have deliberately referred to the sub-culture of the desert, for my argument follows the lines of proving the legitimacy and the integrity of the Egyptian-Christian desert movement and addresses the question of power and authority in the late antique period. Its representatives and upholders, who are different in origin and background, bring forth a new kind of culture, which is opposed to the dominant one of secular society, as well as physically separate from it. This alternative culture – which I have chosen to designate as 'sub-culture' so as to distinguish it from the mainstream of the dominant culture – has not only a new provenance and perimeter (i.e. the physical boundaries of the desert) but also its own ways of articulation or non-articulation that make it distinct and separate. The designation 'sub-culture' should not however suggest that the culture of the desert is somehow *below* the standards of the high secular culture. Quite on the contrary, my attempt is to demonstrate that it epitomizes the very apex of this (secular) culture, in whose periphery and in whose opposition it is forming itself. In order to illustrate this, I shall make use of Plato's *Phaedrus* and, more specifically, Socrates' critique of writing as it is relevant to the issues raised about genre and oral vs. written tradition centered around the phenomenon of the Egyptian desert asceticism and its forms of verbal expression in relation to the brokerage of religious power and authority. Furthermore, Jacques Derrida and his particular critique of totalistic linguistic models and frames of thinking and expression will be referred to in order to cast a new light upon the problematic of genre as it pertains to the society(ies) of Egypt in late antiquity.

#### *The Written Tradition: "Vita Antonii" or "Vita Athanasii"*

*Vita Antonii* is a full-fledged narrative of Antony's life, or his narrated *bios*, starting with his birth and childhood and ending with his death; it is also prefaced by a self-referential explanation of the occasion and the purpose of the *vita* and appended with an address to the prospective readers. Athanasius makes an attempt to render Antony's life within the framework of a narrative for he is aware of the impact that Antony's (lived) life has had and projects a similar possibility of Athanasius' (written) *vita* of Antony. The author is increasingly conscious of the divergence occurring between the two – Antony's actual life and Athanasius' pale and incomplete verbal rendition of it – and thus frames his account within given self-acknowledged limits. Thus, he starts *Vita Antonii* with a bashful excuse for the multiple imperfections of his text largely to be blamed upon external and accidental contingencies:

Well, when I received your letter I wanted to send for some of the monks, especially those who used to associate with him most closely. Thus I might have learned additional details and sent you a fuller account. But the sailing season is about over and the postman is growing impatient; therefore, I make haste to write to Your Reverence what I myself know – for I have seen him often – and whatever I was able to learn from him who was his companion over a long period and poured water on his hands.<sup>2</sup>

Athanasius attributes the hastiness and the incompleteness of his work to the fact that he is subject to a time constraint on the one hand and to the pressure of the inquisitive brethren on the other. Perhaps he implies that a *perfect* account, his being far from such, is possible, albeit it is not the case in this particular instant because of trivialities and externalities, such as time and season. At the very end of the narrative, Athanasius is reminding the reader once again that “although this be but a meager account as compared with the virtue of the man, yet do take this [narrated *vita*] and reflect what manner of man Antony, the man of God, was.”<sup>3</sup> In spite of these express qualifications in the very beginning and end of Athanasius’ *vita*, the author also states that a fuller and more accurate picture of Antony’s life can be derived from other supplemental sources, such as people who come from the Egyptian desert and have extra-information to share. Only when Athanasius’ own inadequate and insufficient by itself narrative is complemented by others’ testimonies could an account “be had that does approximate justice to him.”<sup>4</sup> For the time being, that which can be communicated “by letter”<sup>5</sup> and is supplied by “only a few of the recollections I [Athanasius] have of him”<sup>6</sup> is presented before the reader to digest.

With a similar gesture, the author of *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*<sup>7</sup> prefaces the alphabetical collection of the *vitae* and is even more explicit than Athanasius about his anxieties as an author. His explanation and self-exculpation deserve an extensive quotation:

<sup>2</sup> Athanasius, *The Life of Saint Antony*, trans. Robert T. Meyer (New York: Newman Press, 1978), 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Vita Antonii* 93; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 96.

<sup>4</sup> *Vita Antonii*, Prologue; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Vita Antonii*, Prologue; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Vita Antonii*, Prologue; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, trans. Norman Russell (Oxford: Cistercian Publications, 1981).

I myself am not worthy to undertake such an exposition, because it is not appropriate for humble men to treat of great themes. Their powers are not equal to the task of explaining the truth in a fitting manner, particularly when they presume to commit themselves to writing and give inadequate expression to difficult matters. Since we are of no account, it is too presumptuous and dangerous for us to proceed to write on this most sublime theme. Nevertheless, the pious community that lives on the holy Mount of Olives has asked me repeatedly to write them an account of the practices of the Egyptian monks which I have witnessed, their fervent love and great ascetic discipline.<sup>8</sup> (emphasis added)

The author-compiler of the alphabetical *lives* of the Egyptian desert ascetics is a more self-conscious composer who hints at the problematic lying in the background of Athanasius’ own text but never explicitly stated by himself. This author *de facto* is disclaiming any accurate truth which might pertain to a written text, as such, not only a text laid out in some constraint of time or any circumstantial pressures. What he expresses in this paragraph is not only his own essential incapacity to render into words the “sublime theme” but also his concession to fundamentally question the capacity of narrative and “writing,” as such, to correctly and accurately present the “truth.” Not only does he acknowledge the fact that the verbal creation of *vitae* – as a representation of a living reality – is a hubristic act on his part, but also a danger. This danger resides precisely in his awareness of the many shortcomings of verbal rendition with respect to its model, the real lives of actual people. In spite of this intensified awareness, the author claims exculpation through the mere benefit of such a text allowing for imitation.<sup>9</sup>

Athanasius, although never admitting this readily of his own accord but merely hinting at it, exemplifies in his text the gradual transformation and appropriation of his hero, whom he professes to narrate. The real Antony and Athanasius’ narrated hero in *Vita Antonii* come into an extremely complex relationship to each other and form an amalgam which is sometimes impossible to decipher. The character ‘Antony’ changes significantly from the beginning of the narration till its end and it is precisely the aspect of acculturation or Antony’s attitude toward ‘letters’ as part of culture that would be the focus of our interest.

<sup>8</sup> *The Life of Saint Antony*, 49.

<sup>9</sup> In the Prologue, he states: “derive some profit from the edifying lives of these monks through the imitation of their way of life” See *The Life of Saint Antony*, 49.

As Jacques Derrida notes the irreverent act on Plato's part with respect to Socrates, whom he honors as his spiritual guide but nonetheless betrays by writing "from out his [Socrates'] death,"<sup>10</sup> so too it is perhaps legitimate to accuse Athanasius, the descriptor of Antony's life, of committing a patricidal act with respect to the latter. Indeed, Antony – the very opponent of literary inscribing and even of speech itself – becomes firmly inscribed and fixed in a text that has pinned Antony's *vita* in the most rigid and letter-bound frame. From the upper left corner of the painting (or the page) to its lower right corner Athanasius has filled with utmost care and fore-thought all the contours and the colors so as not to be able to recognize Antony himself but instead to discern an entirely new inscription, the artifact of Athanasius' hand rather than Antony's doings.

Antony is noted and (in)famous for his lack of formal education for he has shunned the company of his peers from his early days and has preferred to stay at home instead of attending school (*kata to gegrammenon*).<sup>11</sup> The very identification of Antony as an "Egyptian by birth"<sup>12</sup> functions as a prelude to the institution of two textual categories that operate in opposition to one another – Greek/pagan vs. Egyptian/Christian. These two categories permeate the narrative and provide a backdrop against which the evolution of Antony's *life* is drawn. However, as 'Antony' himself evolves throughout the narrative, so too these initially fixed categories shift. Athanasius' Antony starts off as one who is thoroughly opposed to the Greek lettered and philosophically-bent tradition. All he strives from the inception of his conscious life is to lead a "simple life"<sup>13</sup> (*hos aplastos oikein en te oikia autou*)<sup>14</sup> and, as it were, to revert back to a sort of primal natural state of both soul and body. He goes to secluded places in order to sever himself from the normal run of life and be at one with nature; even wild animals obey his command and are tamed by him.<sup>15</sup> In consecutive steps, he withdraws farther and farther from home-town and blood relations for the sake of achieving full detachment from them altogether. At the heart

of the desert and on the fringes of civilized society, he defies the limits of humanity and of culture. He does not need any of the appurtenances of culture, such as books for "he retained everything and so his memory served him in place of books."<sup>16</sup> He did not need even to carry the Bible with him, since he had it *inside* him.

In one polemical statement against the 'Greeks' who have to "go abroad and cross the sea to study letters" (*perosin, hina grammata mathosin*),<sup>17</sup> Antony states that the (Egyptian) Christian possesses a virtue inside the self (*en hemin esti kai ex hemon synistatai*).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, this state of virtue is associated with a primary state of the soul, referred to in the text as its "natural state" or "natural state as it was created" (*kata physin...hos ektisthe*).<sup>19</sup> Antony continues by asserting that the "task is not difficult: If we remain as we were made, we are in the state of virtue" (*ean gar meinomen hos gegonamen, en te arete esmen*).<sup>20</sup> Therefore, it seems, this virtue is not only a part of the self, its core, but also a fact of nature as opposed to the humanly constructed and sustained culture together with all of its superfluities. The primal state is only perverted by the intrusion of civilization and initial innocence is thereby destroyed. Thus, in a dispute with 'Greek philosophers,' the "unlettered" Antony (*grammata me mathon*)<sup>21</sup> teaches the lettered Greeks and forces them to concede that "mind" (*nous*) is of primary importance for it is the inventor of "letters" (*ton grammaton heureten*), which are only secondary and supplementary. Antony concludes that "one who has a sound mind has no need of letters" (*ho toinun ho nous hygiainei, touto ouk anagkaia ta grammata*)<sup>22</sup>; the latter in his view present only a superfluity and a redundancy that have to be done away with.

In another encounter with the imaginary opponent, Athanasius' Antony unmasks the Greek penchant for logical proof and argumentation as external and non-related to the essence of true faith. In a series of rhetorical questions, he asks: "How does precise knowledge [*gnosis*] of things come about, especially knowledge of God? Is it by verbal proof [*apodeixeos logon*] or by an act of faith [*energeias pisteos*]? And which comes first, an active faith [*energeias pistis*] or verbal proof [*logon*]

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 148.

<sup>11</sup> *Vita Antonii* 1; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> *Vita Antonii* 1; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> *Vita Antonii* 1; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Vita Antonii* 1. Note the curious and surely non-accidental use of "*aplastos*" meaning 'natural,' 'unaffected,' 'lacking molding' to designate the fact that Antony was untouched and unspoiled by the surrounding culture. In a sense, he is born unto his age and society, but remains *outside* of its scope of influence from his very early days.

<sup>15</sup> *Vita Antonii* 50; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 63.

<sup>16</sup> *Vita Antonii* 3; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Vita Antonii* 20; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 37.

<sup>18</sup> *Vita Antonii* 20; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> *Vita Antonii* 20; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> *Vita Antonii* 20; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 37.

<sup>21</sup> *Vita Antonii* 72; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> *Vita Antonii* 73; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 80.

apodeixis]?"<sup>23</sup> These serious questions raised by Antony concerning the accuracy of knowledge, as well as the aforementioned question concerning letters and verbal reasoning (*grammata* and *logoi*) and their relation to *nous*, once again point out the redundant and extraneous role of *logos* both as word/discourse and as logical proof or verbalized argumentation. Furthermore, Antony asserts that although faith has its origin in the "soul" (*psyche*) and hence possesses some inherent authenticity and genuineness for it is being in immediate proximity with one's own center of being, dialectic is merely a technique, a "skill of those who devise it" (*dialektike apo technes ton suntithenton estin*)<sup>24</sup> and just an art that can be mastered. The verdict of *logos* is undeniable:

Accordingly, those who are equipped with an active faith [*pisteos energeia*] have no need of verbal argument, and probably find it even superfluous [*tacha kai peritte he dia logon apodeixis*]. For what we apprehend by faith, that you attempt to construct by arguments [*dia logon*]; and often you cannot even express what we perceive. The conclusion is that an active faith is better and stronger than your sophistic arguments [*ton sophistikon humon sullogismon*].<sup>25</sup>

Reason and verbal rationalization are downplayed for the sake of underscoring "faith" which is based upon some alleged genealogy whereby it "tangibly precedes any constructive reasoning of arguments (*ek ton logon kataskeuen*)."<sup>26</sup> Faith, understood in this manner, best approaches and partakes of true knowledge, including knowledge about God, whereas reason and verbal argumentation are secondary and perhaps incidental to truth. The *techné* of the letter, as well as the artifice of *logos*, is a masquerade that presents itself for a presumed reality and truthfulness, yet, falls short of them. It is a skill, that properly belongs to the body, to an external and superficial surface, whereas truth, faith, virtue, divine presence belong to the soul, to the inner side of the person and possess an integrity and inviolability denied to the 'letter' *per se*. Hence, when Antony departs from this earthly life, it becomes self-evident that his fame was not due to "his writings" (*suggramaton*), nor "worldly wisdom" (*exothern sophian*), nor "any art" (*tina technen*) – but

instead "solely for his service to God" (*thoesebeian*).<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, it is his proximity and intimacy with God (*theophilous autou psyches esti*),<sup>28</sup> as well as acts, rather than words, that matter and persist even after his death. It is the lived life and not the inscribed *vita* that is the cherished heritage for posterity.

In spite of presenting Antony as an adamant opponent of literary inscription and the philosophical moorings of sophistry as aspects of culture and as extraneous, if not noxious, to knowledge and truth, Athanasius also molds 'Antony' to fit into the discourse of this very culture that he [Antony] was trying to expose and unmask. Thus, when at first Antony is portrayed as someone who shuns and flees more and more his social milieu by going away from the inhabited regions inward into the desert, then suddenly a drastic and unforeseen change occurs: Antony seems to run away from society with all of its cultural trappings, so as to become deeply entangled with it. The juncture at which this significant transformation occurs is when Antony decides to leave his solitude and to embrace the position of a teacher and 'father' of monks.<sup>29</sup> This reversal in his personality and vocation designates an important shift that might indicate the place of Antony's re-claiming and appropriation by Athanasius for the sake of the same culture and civilization – with literacy at its height – that Antony abhorred and avoided. Interestingly enough, this shift in Antony's career happens after he has spent some time living in a "tomb" (*mnema*)<sup>30</sup> and in almost absolute solitude in the desert of Pispir.<sup>31</sup> Antony is literally forced to come out by people who break down the door of his abode and compel him to come out and be seen.<sup>32</sup> At this point, Athanasius attributes to Antony a new "charm in speaking" (*charin de en to lalein*)<sup>33</sup> that greatly aids the needful for the impact (as well as the length) of his discourses is impressive. The power of his speech extends to all kinds of people, both learned and simple, and it meets all kinds of bodily and spiritual needs. His words are indeed said to be "cures" (*hos therapeian edechonto kai tous logous tou gerontos*)<sup>34</sup> in themselves as they have the healing capacity to help and to console.

<sup>23</sup> Vita Antonii 77; The Life of Saint Antony, 83.

<sup>24</sup> Vita Antonii 77; The Life of Saint Antony, 83.

<sup>25</sup> Vita Antonii, 78; The Life of Saint Antony, 84.

<sup>26</sup> Vita Antonii 80; The Life of Saint Antony, 85.

<sup>27</sup> Vita Antonii 93; The Life of Saint Antony, 97.

<sup>28</sup> Vita Antonii 93; The Life of Saint Antony, 97.

<sup>29</sup> Vita Antonii 14, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Vita Antonii 8.

<sup>31</sup> Vita Antonii 11.

<sup>32</sup> Vita Antonii 14.

<sup>33</sup> Vita Antonii 14; The Life of Saint Antony, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Vita Antonii, 56; The Life of Saint Antony, 68.

Most importantly, the radical shift of Antony in *Vita Antonii* that is followed by a number of prolonged and complex discourses signifies the act of patricide on the part of Athanasius for it gives him an occasion to re-paint his hero and to incorporate him back into the very fold that he had already willingly left. This act allows Athanasius to state that, albeit illiterate, Antony "wrote back" (*antegrapsen*)<sup>35</sup> to emperor Constantine in return to his letter, or, to have the right to encourage his monks to "note and write down" (*semeiometha kai grapsomen*)<sup>36</sup> every movement of the soul and the body, so as to expose one's failings and be ashamed of them. It should, however, be noted that Antony does not respond to the emperor without reserve. He remarks the insignificance of the letter by a worldly monarch, and contrasts it to the fact that God "has written the Law" (*ton nomon anthropois egrapse*) and, furthermore, "has spoken to us through His own Son" (*dia tou idiou huiou lelaleken hemin*).<sup>37</sup> Thus, precedence is once again given to speech, albeit a concession to writing is being made too.

Gradually but surely, the rustic and the unlettered Antony is replaced and effaced by the new 'Antony' deeply immersed in theological speculations, such as what is primary and secondary, and entrenched in the traps of literariness. Athanasius depicts *vita Antonii* and in this way decapitates Antony by transforming his life in conformity with his own interests and purposes. Thus the inscription of Antony's *vita* represents the decapitation of Antony and the betrayal of his [Antony's] own personality. The narrative subsumes him under its cover and transforms him into something utterly different, fixes him in a frame and gives him a definite shape and contours via the strikes of the letters – these same letters (or, shall we say fetters) that Antony so desperately and arduously tried to resist and to flee.

The narrative tradition, and hence Athanasius' *Vita Antonii* as a representative of this literary genre, demonstrates an act of embezzlement of the desert ascetics by the highly lettered mainstream culture. These radical figures, most of whom chose to remain orally-inclined and minded,<sup>38</sup> are re-incorporated in the folds of society by the

<sup>35</sup> *Vita Antonii*, 81; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 87.

<sup>36</sup> *Vita Antonii*, 55; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 67.

<sup>37</sup> *Vita Antonii*, 81; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 87.

<sup>38</sup> I do not mean to overlook the fact that some of desert ascetics had a positive attitude toward books and writing. There are accounts of books stolen from the habitat of the desert ascetics, thus indicating that the possession of books was an actuality (*Theodore of Pheme*, 29). Furthermore, there is a strain of positive valuation of books as a source of knowledge for the sake of conducting a godly life (*Epiphanius*, 8). Also, there is evidence for exchange and production of letters (*Poemen*, 90). However, these instances

fact of narration, by the verbal and literary inscription on paper and by the truncation of their lives into literary *vitae*. This act of violence via engraving in letters committed against Antony and his like in the Egyptian desert betrays not only a claim of the charisma and power generated by the acts of heroic lives of the holy (wo)men but also an act of their willful transformation in the texture of the narration. These narrated *vitae* not only purported to describe the lives of dead people (both literally and metaphorically understood).<sup>39</sup> Indeed, they executed an act of decapitation of (the already dead) men and women inhabiting the Egyptian desert and thereby appropriated them for the interests and needs of the larger society. The means of this decapitation is the letter and the form, or the memorial, represented by the literary *vita*. It was an infiltration of dominant culture into the enclave of the desert that also marked the decline and unfolding death of the ascetic endeavor *per se* and a compensation for the living tradition that was far from satisfactory.

#### *The Oral Tradition: "Apophthegmata Patrum"*<sup>40</sup>

The sayings of the desert fathers and mothers consist of the words of different people with diverse backgrounds and, yet, with similar experiences and aspirations for the attainment of a perfect state in compliance with the divine ordinances. All of them embarked on an exodus in the desert of their own accord in order to seek self-transcendence and to challenge themselves to overreach not only the limits of their humanity but also these of their own culture. This attempt for self-perfection and self-transcendence found an appropriate

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remain the overwhelming minority. The prevailing attitude toward books and writing is best illustrated by *abba* Arsenius, one of the most educated men of the Egyptian desert, who upon a request as to why he visits an Egyptian peasant and consults him concerning his own thoughts replies: "I have indeed been taught Latin and Greek, but I do not know even the alphabet of this peasant" (*Arsenius*, 6). Similarly, when *abba* Antony is asked to appraise the three answers given by three different disciples on a verse from Scripture, he acclaims the one who has said: "I do not know" (*Anthony*, 17). It is thus the apprehensiveness and reluctance to use books, as well as the Bible itself, that characterizes the mood of the desert ascetics, rather than willingness to indulge in reading and/or writing.

<sup>39</sup> In *Vita Antonii*, Antony enjoins his followers to die daily, "to live as if we were to die each day" (*Vita Antonii*, 19; *The Life of Saint Antony*, 36). The ideal is to die completely, both to the world and to the (old) self.

<sup>40</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will make use of the alphabetical edition of *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Oxford: Cistercian Publications, 1984).



expression in one literary genre, most typical of the authentic desert tradition—the oral sayings.

Despite the fact that we avail ourselves with the written version of the actual sayings of the desert *abbas* and *ammas*, it must be noted that the attitude of the desert practitioners (even) toward oral articulation is especially ambiguous. On the one hand, speech is considered to be a salutary means and, on the other hand, it is regarded as a baneful artifact. For instance, letting out one's bothersome thoughts and problems can function as a healing and a relief from an intense internal struggle.<sup>41</sup> Also, the gift of speech may have the capacity of instituting a young ascetic as an *abba* in the sight of his companions.<sup>42</sup> It is noteworthy that the uttered sayings of the desert ascetics are usually not general recipes or panaceas for perfection and salvation of the human race. Instead, they are concrete directions and pieces of advice meant for one particular situation and a particular person, with a specific problem. The sayings are tailored according to the needs and the stages of development that a given person is currently undergoing. Although some of them have been preserved without any detailed explanatory framework, they arise from and remain deeply entrenched in given situational circumstances that both bind them and give them effective power.<sup>43</sup>

Nonetheless, the desert ascetics are most poignantly aware of and careful about the multiple traps of human speech, precisely because of its ambiguity and the usual proclivity to slip from other-worldly talk to this-worldly babble,<sup>44</sup> as well as the capacity of speech to enter straight into the inner parts of the speaker and/or hearer. Words are perceived as something external and, very often, noxious that sneaks into the inner courts of the human being and has an injurious effect upon it. Thus, when one brother is grieved by his fellow, he realizes the fatal result of its entry: "I prayed God to rid me of this word. So it became like blood in my mouth and I have it spat out. Now I am in peace, have forgotten the matter."<sup>45</sup> Elsewhere in *Apophthegmata Patrum*, *abba* Tithoes responds to the question "How should I guard my heart?" with another question "How can we guard our hearts when our mouths and our stomachs are open?"<sup>46</sup> The orifices of the human being, such as the mouth, the ear or

the stomach, present a difficulty for they allow externalities, such as words or food, to enter inside and sow their kind. The heart, or the center of the human self, is vulnerable to any external and extraneous stuff penetrating into the inside and thus directly impacting it.

In addition, calumny and any evil speech are likened to the serpent's poison that "corrupts the soul of him who listens to him and he does not save his own soul."<sup>47</sup> *Abba* Hyperechius substantiates this claim for the lethal effect of malevolent speech by the fact of the original fall since "[i]t was through whispering that the serpent drove Eve out of Paradise."<sup>48</sup> Hence, it was speech and not anything else that caused the fall of humanity. Speech is not merely assigned the blame for the loss of paradisaical state; what is more, it breeds sins of its own: "No passion is worse than an uncontrolled tongue, because it is the mother of all the passions."<sup>49</sup> Speech in its uncontrollability and unpredictability is an obstacle to the attainment of perfection and to the acquisition of virtuous life. Indeed, it is a villain that not only allows for the corruption of the soul and the loss of the possibility for salvation, but also permits cannibalism: "It is better to eat meat and drink wine and not to eat the flesh of one's brethren through slander."<sup>50</sup>

The only exit from the slipperiness of human speech that can both uplift to heavenly heights and bring down to the abyss of the netherworld<sup>51</sup> is *silence*. In fact, exodus for some of the desert inhabitants does stand for silence, and not merely for the physical severing from civilization. The presence of people and the nuisance of noise are in direct correlation and, hence, it is not surprising that the exiles construe solitude and exodus as silence. Whereas one who "mixes with the crowds constantly receives blows"<sup>52</sup> in terms of disquieting the internal peace and tranquility, one who isolates and withdraws into the perimeter of the desert is able to achieve inner stability and calm. As one of the *abbas* rightfully states that the *via* and *modus vivendi* of the holy men are a constant and incessant journey – "For always I must wander, in order to finish my course"<sup>53</sup> – so too another concedes that the true exodus is the constraint of speech: "If you cannot control your tongue, you will not be an exile anywhere. Therefore control your tongue here,

<sup>41</sup> *Poemen*, 93; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 180.

<sup>42</sup> *Poemen*, 60; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 175.

<sup>43</sup> For instance, see the different instructions an *abba* gives to two different people in accordance with their abilities and his perspicuous discernment of these. (*Poemen*, 22; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 170).

<sup>44</sup> *Ammos*, 1; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 30.

<sup>45</sup> *Achilles*, 4; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 29.

<sup>46</sup> *Tithoes*, 3; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 236.

<sup>47</sup> *Hyperechius*, 5; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 238.

<sup>48</sup> *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 238.

<sup>49</sup> *Agathon*, 1; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 20.

<sup>50</sup> *Hyperechius*, 4; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 238.

<sup>51</sup> *Megethius*, 4; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 150.

<sup>52</sup> *Nilus*, 9; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 154.

<sup>53</sup> *Bessarion*, 12; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 43.

and you will be an exile."<sup>54</sup> Macarius the Great, when questioned by one of his brothers "Where could we flee beyond the desert?" puts his finger on his lips and says: "Flee that," goes to his cell and shuts himself inside it.<sup>55</sup> The only possible pilgrimage through the desert and through the world altogether is control of speech, best exemplified by the maintenance of silence.<sup>56</sup>

Silence is not only a preventive and a cathartic measure for the attainment of inner peace and, ultimately, for ensuring salvation. More importantly, it signifies the divine presence and the human communion with the deity in an unmediated and direct fashion. Whereas words in their dangerous ambiguity and fluidity might "justify" or might "condemn,"<sup>57</sup> silence is the guarantor of divine presence within the self and, therefore, of its salvation. The solitary cell of the ascetic has a special significance for it is the place where silence is made possible; indeed, it is the teacher of silence. *Abba* Moses pronounces to someone seeking his word: "Go, sit in your cell and it will teach you everything."<sup>58</sup> By far, silence is the best instructor. The most important aspect of this enclosed solitude is the resultant communion with the Creator and the privileged position of the human beneficiary. One is granted an intimacy and a close proximity to the divine, so that the *abba* or the *amma* can converse with God, rather than with humans. Thus, when one person praises *abba* John for his excellent work, the latter keeps quiet after the first two compliments and after the third utters: "Since you came here, you have driven God away from me."<sup>59</sup> Once again, speech in this instance designates the distance from God, whereas silence implies an intimate communion and immediate presence of the divine. *Abba* Poemen confirms the realization of *abba* John in stating:

If the soul keeps far away from all discourse in word, from all disorder and human disturbance, the Spirit of God will come in to her and she who was barren will be fruitful.<sup>60</sup>

Consequently, silence is to be treasured and pursued not only as a detachment from the harangue of mankind but also as a personal

<sup>54</sup> Longinus, 1; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 122.

<sup>55</sup> Macarius the Great, 16; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. "Pilgrimage means that a man should control his own tongue" (*Tithoes*, 2; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 236).

<sup>57</sup> Poemen, 42; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 173.

<sup>58</sup> Moses, 6; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 139.

<sup>59</sup> John the Dwarf, 32; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 92.

<sup>60</sup> Poemen, 205; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 195.

attachment to God and as a blessed state in the divine presence. Instead of debasing themselves in speaking to (wo)men, the angelic ascetics elevate themselves and converse with God.<sup>61</sup>

In spite of the preferred communion with God to communication with other human beings and, perhaps, due to this direct contact with the divine, the holy inhabitants of the desert are constantly asked to dispense 'a word/saying' for the sake of fellow Christians. There is some urgency and pressing necessity in the usual address to the *abba* or *amma* 'Give me a word! What should I do to be saved?' One of the supplicants even states: "Speak a word to me for I am perishing."<sup>62</sup> In such an emergency situation, when one is struggling for the certainty of salvation and the evasion of death, any 'word' or 'saying' *per se* would be inadequate and insufficient in itself. The answer to this plea, thus, is: "I myself am in danger, so what can I say to you?"<sup>63</sup> Albeit asking for 'a word' on part of their spiritual superiors, the questioners are essentially asking for an indication of what *to do* in order to obtain the much desired salvation. Instruction in words, however, is only an attribute to those who have achieved an advancement in their perfection and can offer the fruit of practical experience rather than mere theoretical knowledge.

Instructing one's neighbor is for the man who is whole and without passions; for what is the use of building the house of another, while destroying one's own?<sup>64</sup>

In order to teach, one has to possess an integrity and to be able to edify through words, as well as through acts. Hence, when asked for 'a word' *abba* Or answers: "Go, and what you have seen me do, do also."<sup>65</sup> Then, silence ensues.

What is striking about this persistent request for 'a word/saying' is that it is not only intricately connected to the question of salvation and to concrete directions for *modus vivendi*, but it is furthermore always distinguished from the plural 'words' understood as human discourse and distraction from God as well as dissipation of the soul. Request for a word and the factuality of worldly words differ significantly and in this difference resides the key to unlock the complex attitude of the desert fathers and mothers to verbal articulation and speech. As silence is

<sup>61</sup> Pambo, 7; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 197.

<sup>62</sup> Theodore of Pherme, 20; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 76.

<sup>63</sup> Theodore of Pherme, 20; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 76.

<sup>64</sup> Poemen, 127; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 185.

<sup>65</sup> Or, 7; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 247.

integrally related to the divine presence, so the singularity of *word* – as opposed to *words* – is associated with being, with acts of life rather than with any abstraction. The decomposition and dispersal of word into words in this case designates the disintegration of the direct link to God and the denial of human perfectability derived from it. The main concern of the desert ascetics however is not to ‘word’ but to ‘be’ or, more precisely, to ‘become.’

The prohibition of teaching in words without exemplifying in acts is due to the perception of a necessary harmony between and coincidence of ‘word’ and ‘being,’<sup>66</sup> or acts of life. Therefore, the best way to teach is through demonstration and personal example, instead of reading books or listening to discourses. Accumulation of books in the desert is branded not only as superfluous but also as sinful as it is a worldly possession that can potentially generate income for the needful.<sup>67</sup> Commentary on the Scriptures is sometimes undertaken, but is preferably not to be expounded upon. One is praised highly when restraining from pronouncement on Scripture<sup>68</sup> for such an endeavor forebodes a potential danger. When asked whether to comment on “Scripture” or on the “sayings of the Fathers,” *abba* Amoun responds that “you had better talk about the sayings of the Fathers than about the Scriptures; it is not so dangerous.”<sup>69</sup>

Speech and any verbal utterance, as much as they cannot be avoided, must be in compliance with one’s *via*, or manner of life. Indeed, the ‘word’ and the whole being and life-style of the ascetic must coincide and form one integral whole. The desert ascetic must become a word, must become a sign<sup>70</sup> to be read and to be studied by the rest so as to be copied and imitated. What the holy (wo)man strives for is to become a lucid sign sufficient in itself to be recognized and to be legible for others. Any other articulation of their lives is a compromise and a fall from the lofty height s/he aspires to. Thus, it is not solely the

<sup>66</sup> In connecting ‘word’ and ‘being,’ rather than ‘word’ and ‘event,’ as does Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 18-19, 77. I would like to distinguish my approach from his. Burton-Christie borrows this idea from the two meanings of the Hebrew word ‘*dabar*’ as expounded by Walter Ong in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen), 1985, 31. The close association of ‘word’ and ‘event’ betrays a latent Hebraism, which I consider inappropriate in the context of the Egyptian desert tradition and would like to avoid for reasons that will become obvious in the course of this paper.

<sup>67</sup> Serapion, 2; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 227.

<sup>68</sup> Poemen, 8; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 167.

<sup>69</sup> Amoun of Nitria, 2; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 32.

<sup>70</sup> On this issue, Geoffrey Harpham concurs. See *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 16.

avoidance of the multiplicity of words – understood as the worldly noise – that the desert ascetics are after but, more importantly, the avoidance of any verbal articulation of ‘a word’ to a seeking soul. The ideal is to do away with the superfluity of word(s) and to become one instead. This new (wo)man-become-word or (wo)man-become-sign will be as a signpost designating and embodying the proper way of being-in-this-world, as well as edifying. Quite understandably, *abba* Poemen enjoins a younger companion: “be their example, not their legislator.”<sup>71</sup> The goal is not as much to realize a given text in life,<sup>72</sup> as much as it is to *become* an autonomous text perfectly legible and transparent to the rest; to be a text that does not need any explanation or any supplemental texts or words in order to communicate itself in a coherent and intelligible manner and to instruct most successfully and fruitfully.

### Plato: “*Phaedrus*” and the Critique of Writing

Plato’s *Phaedrus*, and in particular its second part, provides a critique of writing unfolded throughout the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus. It has many points of commonality with the critique of textual and verbal inscription launched by the desert holy (wo)men and thus is especially pertinent for an examination of the problematic of literary production in both oral and written forms. In it Socrates is lured by Phaedrus to go out of the city of Athens in order to be able to hear a written speech that Phaedrus holds in his hands. Socrates admits the unusual temporary ‘exodus’ from the city that he explains in the following way:

I am devoted to learning; landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me – only the people in the city can do that. But you, I think, have found a potion to charm me into leaving [*dokeis moi tes emes exocou to pharmakon heurekenai*].<sup>73</sup>

The word used here for “potion” is *pharmakon*, which in the Greek might have a range of meanings, such as “medical drug, a poison, or a magical potion.”<sup>74</sup> This term is important for, later in the text, it comes to designate writing and its dubious effect on people. The written speech

<sup>71</sup> Poemen, 174; *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 191.

<sup>72</sup> Burton-Christie refers to an “appropriation” of text, more specifically of the Scriptures. See *The Word in the Desert*, 153-4.

<sup>73</sup> *Phaedrus* 230D, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 6.

<sup>74</sup> See *Phaedrus*, 79; footnote 181.

of Lysias, being held in the hands of Phaedrus, thus engenders a conversation on the aptness and ineptitude of human discourse in general, both in its oral and written form.

The critique of human discourse is twofold – first it is exercised on rhetoric as the art of oral persuasion, and only then on verbal inscription of spoken discourse. The engagement with rhetoric is to determine whether and when it is an “art” (*techne*) and an “artless practice” (*atechnos tribe*).<sup>75</sup> Socrates, the mouthpiece of Plato, claims that rhetorical art is first and foremost *psychagogia*, or guiding of the soul, via the means of speech.<sup>76</sup> The distinction between artful and artless rhetoric resides in the discernment of truth and the possession of genuine knowledge. The art of one who has no grasp of truth is no art whatsoever but a “ridiculous thing.”<sup>77</sup> The true rhetorician is a dialectician indeed and any other version of the art of persuasion is a parody and a sham.<sup>78</sup>

Socrates charges alleged rhetoricians with twisting and misrepresenting truth, if they ever happen to be conscious of it, for they not only attempt to please the base tastes of the crowd, but also stick pathetically to the principle of *eikos*, the ‘likely,’ as opposed to *aletheia*, or truth itself. Such dilettantes are capable of making “small things appear great and great appear small.”<sup>79</sup> Their art, or pretense thereof, is not invested in the pursuit of truth: “They only care about what is convincing. This is called ‘the likely’ [*eikos*]... Whatever you say, you should pursue what is likely and leave the truth aside,” especially when reality does not ‘seem’ to approximate what is ‘likely,’ or *eikos*.<sup>80</sup> In Socrates’ view, similar practitioners of rhetoric, which is usually acquired through “courses and handbooks,”<sup>81</sup> cannot be regarded as serious for they know the “preliminaries” of the art but not the art itself.<sup>82</sup> On account of their dilettantism and artlessness they are blameworthy and well deserving of poignant critique.<sup>83</sup>

The alternative proposed by Socrates is that of dialectics. In order to be an authentic rhetorician, one needs to be an experienced

<sup>75</sup> *Phaedrus* 260E.

<sup>76</sup> *Phaedrus* 261A.

<sup>77</sup> *Phaedrus* 262C.

<sup>78</sup> *Phaedrus* 266C.

<sup>79</sup> *Phaedrus* 267A.

<sup>80</sup> *Phaedrus* 272E.

<sup>81</sup> *Phaedrus* 269D.

<sup>82</sup> *Phaedrus* 269A.

<sup>83</sup> See the analogy with a doctor who has read books and has knowledge of a few potions, yet, remains a laughable impostor. See *Phaedrus* 268C.

reader of souls and knower of speeches. He parallels the method of rhetoric with that of medicine for the former is concerned with impacting the soul in a salutary way, whereas the latter with the body.<sup>84</sup> The orator/diagnostician has to determine the nature of the object he is intending to treat so as to prescribe the correct dosage and ingredients of the speech/*pharmakon*.<sup>85</sup> Not only is it necessary to investigate the power, nature, forms and effects of a discourse upon the human soul, but it is also important to study the nature of soul, its kinds and characteristics, in order to be able to match the appropriate speech for a given soul so as to be efficacious.<sup>86</sup> A system of classification of souls and speeches is needed in order to develop an explanatory apparatus for the complex workings of speech upon the human soul, to understand the interaction between the speech and the soul and to account for any successes or failures of the art of persuasion. It is a scientification of rhetorical art and its subordination to a rationale. Most importantly, the practitioner of this art must know the precise *kairos* for both speaking and being silent.<sup>87</sup> Only then is one a true master of the art.

Socrates concludes that the practice of the rhetorical art is an arduous business that involves lengthy and troublesome studies before one could fully understand and be able to coordinate speeches and human souls in the correct manner. He states that the pursuit of this difficult art is never done for the sake of fellow humans but instead “to be able to speak and act in a way that pleases the gods as much as possible.”<sup>88</sup> The question of the possibility of achieving such level of proficiency, however, remains open.

The second part of Socrates’ twofold critique involves writing *per se*. The starting point for his launching of an attack on writing is a purportedly ancient myth of the origination of the art of writing. Socrates relates that the father of writing is an Egyptian god by the name of Thoth, who also invented the numbers, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and others.<sup>89</sup> The correct appraisal of this new skill, however, comes not from the father of writing himself, who like all

<sup>84</sup> *Phaedrus* 270.

<sup>85</sup> Please note that *pharmakon* is not a word that Plato uses in reference to spoken discourse but only to written speech or to writing. However, from his analogy between medicine and rhetoric, this can be easily inferred to refer to oral discourse too. Hence, my liberty to make use of it in this context.

<sup>86</sup> *Phaedrus* 271. It is noteworthy that Athanasius also likens Antony to a “physician” of the soul. See *Vita Antonii* 83-88.

<sup>87</sup> *Phaedrus* 272A.

<sup>88</sup> *Phaedrus* 273E.

<sup>89</sup> *Phaedrus* 274D.

parents is partial and deluded about the actual significance of his offspring, but instead from the king-god Thamus, or Ammon. Whereas the former declares: "O, King, here is something that, once learned, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory; I have discovered a potion [*pharmakon*] for memory [*mneme*] and wisdom [*sophia*],"<sup>90</sup> the latter responds harshly, as follows:

And now, since you are the father of writing [*pater on grammaton*], your affection for it has made you describe its effects as opposite [*tounantion*] of what they really are. In fact, it will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others [*dia pistin graphes exothen hup' allotrion tupon*], instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own [*ouk endothen autous hup' hauton anamimneskomenous*]. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding [*oukoun mnemes, alla hupomneseos, pharmakon heures*]; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom [*doxan*], not with its reality [*aletheian*].<sup>91</sup> (emphasis added)

This statement is very telling for the critique of writing is directed precisely against what it presumes or claims to be. Writing is unmasked by the king-god as a pretense and a sham art presenting itself for the sake of accumulation of knowledge and, yet, working against human memory and wisdom. It is precisely the opposite of what it presents itself to be. The king-god perceives danger of such an invention and plainly states that,

[Writing] will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing. And they will be difficult to get along with, since they will merely appear to be wise [*doxosophoi*] instead of really being so [*anti sophon*].<sup>92</sup> (emphasis added)

<sup>90</sup> *Phaedrus* 274E.

<sup>91</sup> *Phaedrus* 275A.

<sup>92</sup> *Phaedrus* 275B.

Thus, the two major attacks launched against writing are firstly its externality to the human being and, thus, its ineffectiveness as a tool for *mneme*, and secondly its subversion. As the king asserts, writing is a system of signification that can only serve as an '*aide-memoire*,' as a *hypomnesis* or a reminding, an anterior propping to lean on. Its function as *hypomnesis* rather than *mneme*, which is an internal working of the mind, is in accordance with its being an external sign or memorial. Not only is writing blameworthy for its radically estranged position from the movements of the human soul, but it is furthermore charged with appearance rather than truthfulness. Its re-presentation is its misrepresentation. This charge against literary inscription parallels Plato's critique of the poets in the *Republic* where he decides to exclude the poets from the mental construction of the perfect city because of their being thrice-distanced from the truth, i.e. because their work mimics and represents inaccurately the original whose copy it is.<sup>93</sup> An inherent extraneousness, a superfluity and, even, a danger are that which characterizes the art of writing, being jettisoned uncompromisingly as merely a *hypomnesis*, as outward "reminders to those who already know."<sup>94</sup>

Furthermore, Socrates remarks that any piece of writing, when left to itself, is insufficient for it always needs the defense and the support of its "father";<sup>95</sup> alone, it is entirely helpless and fully dependent. Lastly, any written words possess no control over their fate for they wander far away in their promiscuity and without regard of whether the reader has an understanding or not.<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, a written discourse, as well as a painting, "remains solemnly silent" and needs the living voice of its composer in order to arrive at lucid comprehension and eventual effectiveness.<sup>97</sup>

The alternative to writing in letters proposed by Socrates is a writing "in the soul" of a person.<sup>98</sup> Thus, the ideal is explicated, as follows:

*Socrates*: It is a discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener; it can defend itself, and it knows for whom it should speak and for whom it should remain silent.

<sup>93</sup> *Republic* X, 596a ff.

<sup>94</sup> *Phaedrus* 278A.

<sup>95</sup> *Phaedrus* 275E.

<sup>96</sup> *Phaedrus* 275E.

<sup>97</sup> *Phaedrus* 275D.

<sup>98</sup> *Phaedrus* 276A.

*Phaedrus*: You mean the living, breathing discourse of the man who knows, of which the written one can be fairly called an image [*eidolon*].

*Socrates*: Absolutely right.<sup>99</sup>

The inscription in the soul is living and real, whereas the inscription in letters is a demarcation of death and perversion of human discourse. While the former preserves the integrity and the wholeness of the speaker, the latter turns against its own father, or mother, and against its recipient in that it is a monstrous weakling – or, more strongly put, an illegitimate child. Socrates states explicitly that writing as an act of sowing a seed (the seed of discourse)<sup>100</sup> is fruitful only when it is inscribed in the soul of a person, for only in this case can it be “clear, perfect, and worth serious attention.”<sup>101</sup> Thus, the legitimate offspring of a rhetor is the soul’s inscription with words that, on their part, breed their own offspring or siblings:

Such discourses should be called his own legitimate children, first the discourse he may have discovered within himself and then its sons and brothers who may have grown naturally in other souls insofar as these are worthy...<sup>102</sup>

It must be noted, however, that psychic writing remains a metaphor used by Socrates to put forth his point rather than re-institute and rehabilitate writing as such. He does not propose two kinds of writing, one bad and one good, but rather contrasts *logos* which is internal, alive and authentic to its material and outward inscription, which is frozen and petrified on the page. Hence, it is once again the *phone* or the spoken *logos* which takes precedence over deaf and the numb engraving in *grammata*.

<sup>99</sup> *Phaedrus* 276A.

<sup>100</sup> *Phaedrus* 276C.

<sup>101</sup> *Phaedrus* 278A.

<sup>102</sup> *Phaedrus* 278A.

### *Jacques Derrida: The Critique of Platonism*

Jacques Derrida in his essay “Plato’s Pharmacy”<sup>103</sup> provides an alternative and insightful reading to the classical reading of Plato’s critique of writing and thus goes against the grain of the text in order to dismantle and debunk a whole system of construing writing. Derrida uses Plato’s text against Platonism, interrogates Plato before his own tribunal, and unveils the different strata of inherent metaphysics underlying his system of writing and his framework of thought. In so doing, he unmasks the tyranny of a metaphysics concerned with logocentrism, which Derrida understands strictly as phonocentrism, with presence (*to on*), with being (*ousia*) and with truth (*aletheia*). This edifice of western metaphysical undertakings that holds a sway since Plato is a cultural dictum that Derrida wants to surpass and to supplant. In so doing, he strives to go beyond the simple binary oppositions of the decadence and fall of writing over against a spontaneity and splendor of living speech, the sham of re-presentation as an absence over against an irreplaceable presence, the multiplicity of copies over against an irreducible truth. These are namely the cultural imperatives of the west deeply entrenched in a pervasive binarism of opposites<sup>104</sup> that Derrida revolts against and investigates ‘Plato’s pharmacy’ for a resolution. Indeed, this deconstructive reading is not merely an interrogation but a rending of the facade of dialectics or rhetoric and, thereby, exposing the (otherwise hidden and hiding) construction of ontology or theology – the shameless and merciless undressing of Platonism to its very nakedness.

In commenting on Plato’s myth on the origin of writing, Derrida notes the fact that although the father of this new *techne* is Thoth, he remains in the background of the story as merely a “technocrat without the power of decision, an engineer, a clever, ingenious servant”<sup>105</sup> in contrast to the supreme king-god, who is the other father-figure, this time of *logos* or living speech. The king-father is the blinding and dazzling sun, the origin of all being (*ta onta*) and of the *logos*. The father of the

<sup>103</sup> First published in *Tel Quel*, Nos 32 and 33, 1968. My citations are provided from its reprint in the volume *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61-171.

<sup>104</sup> Derrida is interested not as much in the borrowed myth of origins for writing, as much as in the underlying structure: “Plato had to make his tale conform to structural laws. The most general of these, those that govern and articulate the oppositions speech/writing, life/death, father/son, master/servant, first/second, legitimate son/orphan-bastard, soul/body, inside/outside, good/evil, seriousness/play, day/night, sun/moon, etc.” *Dissemination*, 85.

<sup>105</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, 86.

*logos* is thus in no need of writing and condemns it for its essential uselessness and menace.

God the king does not know how to write, but that ignorance or incapacity only testifies to his sovereign independence. He has no need to write. He speaks, he says, he dictates, and his word suffices.<sup>106</sup>

The *logos*, whose origin is the father, implies the presence of its own progenitor. It cannot exist independently and of itself for it needs the father to be what it is, a living discourse. When the father is no longer present, *logos* degenerates into writing and, furthermore, becomes a criminal for it commits a patricidal act. Therefore, "[t]he specificity of writing would thus be intimately bound to the absence of the father."<sup>107</sup> Derrida does not look at the status of writing in a simplistic and straightforward way, for he affirms the ambiguity of a pitiable orphan-son and a guilty parricidal son that constitutes the concept of writing. As a result of his *hubris*, the son turns into a kind of a bastard-child that forgets its origin and strays away wandering indiscriminately in all directions. The miserable orphan, as well as writing of which it is a symbol,

being nobody's son at the instant it reaches inscription, scarcely remains a son at all and no longer *recognizes* its origins, whether legally or morally. In contrast to writing, living *logos* is alive in that it has a father (whereas the orphan is already half dead), a father that is *present*, *standing* near it, behind it, within it, sustaining it with his rectitude, attending it in person in his own name.<sup>108</sup>

The key phrase in this comparison of the legitimate and illegitimate sons, of speech and writing, is the fact that literary inscription is "half dead," that it is not a corpse but something between a living and a dead body. This position on the borderline of two opposing categories is best captured by the duplicity and fluidity of a term that Plato himself uses to refer to writing – *pharmakon*.

The case of writing is a grave one, but not a simple one. The verdict of the father-god-king hints at its complexity and multi-

<sup>106</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, 76.

<sup>107</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, 77.

<sup>108</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, 77.

facetedness. *Pharmakon* as writing, or writing as *pharmakon*, cannot be classified in one category only, such as bad or good, noxious or innocuous, baneful or salutary, external or internal. It encompasses all of these opposites and *is* these opposite categories at the same time. In its ambiguous and changeable nature, the drug, albeit originally coming from without, can penetrate the inner of the human body and act as a cure as well as a poison. It can both vivify and mortify. It can have these opposite effects on the body depending on its measure and its manner of application. Thus, writing, albeit a degenerate art, can have unpredictable and harmful effects upon the human soul by penetrating it and making it forgetful (*lethen*) rather than endowing it with superior memory and wisdom.<sup>109</sup> The antidote to it is knowledge (*episteme*) for only the one who knows its ambivalence and danger is able to handle it correctly.

Most importantly, Derrida demonstrates that Plato presents writing not as pertaining to a series of binary opposites but rather as constituting itself a contradictory and complex phenomenon which cannot be easily regarded under the rubric of oppositions (the latter being an instance of Platonism's totalitarian grip over western philosophical tradition). The power, or the malice, of this magic 'potion' of writing is that it is *neither* one opposite of the spectrum, *nor* the other, but *both* at the same time. It is neither, nor; both, and. It possesses the powers of good and evil, and it changes poles in the moment of a blink. To reduce it to any single thing will be a grave mistake and unpardonable ignorance.<sup>110</sup> Notwithstanding, the condemnation of writing as *pharmakon* is not that it is maleficent or fraught with mutability and ambivalence. Rather, the charge is that the living "*logos* is a more effective *pharmakon*"<sup>111</sup> that immediately penetrates and impacts the inner courts of the soul. It thus does not have the *différance* of the writing, as coined by Derrida to capture both the difference and the distance (derived from 'differ' and 'defer') involved in its operation. Of course, by the dint of some divine irony, *logos* is both *pharmakon* but

<sup>109</sup> In commenting on the effects of writing on memory, Derrida writes: "Letting itself [memory] be stoned [medusee] by its own signs, its own guardians, by the types committed to the keeping and surveillance of knowledge, it will sink into *lethe*, overcome by non-knowledge, and forgetfulness. Memory and truth cannot be separated. The movement of *aletheia* is a deployment of *mneme* through and through." (*Dissemination*, 105)

<sup>110</sup> See Derrida's critique of the reduction of *pharmakon*, or writing, to only one signification, namely negative or positive alone, as mistaken. Cf. *Dissemination*, 99, especially 103-4.

<sup>111</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, 115.



also the antidote, *alexipharmakon*; it is that which opposes its own opposite.<sup>112</sup> It both infects and then offers catharsis. All of this is possible because of the duplicity of *pharmakon* and its lack of essence or stability:

If the *pharmakon* is 'ambivalent,' it is because it constitutes a medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.). It is on the basis of this play or movement that the opposites or differences are stopped by Plato. The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference.<sup>113</sup>

At this juncture Derrida surpasses classical understanding of Platonism and offers an alternative to it. This alternative overcomes the imposition of binary oppositions, of the tyranny of ontology<sup>114</sup> in the history of western metaphysics that has so unjustly relegated writing to a secondary, derivative, and inferior position to that of living discourse. The secrets of Plato's pharmacy are divulged by the gracious skill and the careful anatomy of the *pharmakeus* Derrida so as to demonstrate the emancipation from the chains of 'Platonism' and the overcoming of binarism. Derrida speaks best for himself:

[T]he disappearance of the god-father-capital-sun is thus the precondition for discourse, taken this time as a moment and not as a principle of *generalized* writing. That writing (is) *epekeina tes ousias* [beyond beingness or presence]. The disappearance of truth as presence, the withdrawal of the present origin of presence, is the condition of all (manifestations of) truth. Nontruth is the truth. Nonpresence is the presence. Differance, the disappearance of any originary presence, is *at once* the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of truth.<sup>115</sup> (emphasis original)

<sup>112</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, 124.

<sup>113</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, 127.

<sup>114</sup> By the principle of ontology pervading any discipline in the west, Derrida means the dictate of truth, presence, and being. See Derrida, *Dissemination*, 166.

<sup>115</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, 168.

## Conclusion

The ascetics inhabiting the Egyptian desert may have never read Plato.<sup>116</sup> Certainly, they could not have read Derrida either or even anticipated his onslaught on Platonism. However, they embodied and lived to a large extent what both Plato and Derrida write about. The holy (wo)men experienced most profoundly and categorically the ambiguity of *logos*, both in its written and oral forms, as *pharmakon* or as a potentially salutary and dangerous medium whose ambivalence had to be circumvented at all cost. Furthermore, in transcending their own selves – by becoming an angelic *other* – and their respective culture via the coinage of an alternative one, the desert ascetics overturned the existing metaphysical and physical propping of their own society. In their deeds and being, they overcame the dominion of cultural oppositions, such as matter/spirit, body/soul, terrestrial/celestial, speech/writing, and towered high above these. They incorporated in themselves and in their lives these contradictory extremes and, somehow, managed to reconcile them by making it possible for them to cohabit. Hence, it is not in the least surprising that *amma* Sarah captures this metamorphosis in the following way:

She also said to the brothers, 'It is I who am a man, you who are women.'<sup>117</sup>

Or, that the black *abba* Moses is qualified in this manner:

'Moses, now you are entirely white.'<sup>118</sup>

This subversion which, at the same time, is a coincidence of opposites via their transcendence is precisely what the desert ascetics achieved *de jure* and *de facto*. An overcoming of binarism whereby the two (otherwise mutually exclusive) opposites come to coexist in intimate proximity and, indeed, become non-distinguishable from each other. A mark, and its effacement.

<sup>116</sup> It should be remarked that some of the desert ascetics are indicated to be highly literate people and, thus, it would come as no surprise if they were acquainted with Plato's works.

<sup>117</sup> Sarah 9; *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 230.

<sup>118</sup> Moses 4; *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 139.